



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Psychoanalytic Exploration of Sisterhood among Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* and Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of a Red Light Area*

<sup>1</sup>Hania Iftikhar\*, <sup>2</sup>Noor-ul- Ain Raza and <sup>3</sup>Fatima Asif

1. Lecturer, Department of English, Institute of Southern Punjab, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Lecturer, Department of English, Institute of Southern Punjab, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Research Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Punjab, Pakistan

\*Corresponding Author | haniaiftikhar0@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

Sisterhood is a forum that has provided women with the liberty to stand and fight for each other against the patriarchal society owing to the similar experiences of oppression. Based on this perspective, this study attempts to explore the bond of sisterhood among the prostitutes with the help of Lacan's theory of registers namely the imaginary, symbolic and the real along with the themes of Other and the desire. Louise Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* and Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of a Red Light Area*-two ethnographic studies- have been considered to explore the bond of sisterhood, the desires/lacks of the prostitute and the red-light area as the Lacanian real to sustain the socio-symbolic order of patriarchal Pakistani society. Owing to the same pattern of earning and the domination of patriarchal society, the bond of sisterhood among the prostitutes is examined as broken and shabby.

**KEY WORDS:** Lacanian Registers, Prostitution, Psychological Study, Sisterhood

## Introduction

Prostitution is a business where women called as prostitutes earn their livelihood by selling art like singing, dancing and sexual services to the customers who are men. The word "prostitution" is derived from the Latin "pro" meaning "up front" or "forward" and "stituere", defined as "to offer up for sale" (Perkins & Lovejoy, 2007). Places where prostitution is carried out are called kothas or red-light areas where girls and women run this business in houses managed by the elderly women called the caretaker/naika (TimothyTyoanande & Samson, 2014).

In Pakistan, prostitution is a taboo, that is rarely discussed and it is assumed that this business does not exist. During the reign of General Ayub Khan, strict laws were devised to curb the rise in prostitution and only the display of dance and singing were allowed. However, despite every restriction, the cities like Lahore, Multan and Sahiwal has areas called Shahi Mohallah and Heera Mandi where prostitutes run their business and men as customers visit these places for pleasure and sexual services (Rizvi, 2015). Prostitutes are called bad women and are never accepted by the patriarchal society because providing sexual services is an immoral act and is condemned both by the religion and the society (Khan et al., 2010).

Sisterhood among women is the form of friendship that allows them to enjoy, support and understand each other's ideas, beliefs and traumas. Women who are not bound by the biological ties can use it as a bond of solidarity (Hudson-Weems, 2004).

Sisterhood is a nurturing and supportive feeling that fills the women with the spirits of attachment and loyalty and allows them to share and speak up the fears, traumas and the sexist repressions they suffer from every day and ultimately retrieve power and position against the patriarchal society. Sisterhood is based on the mutual trust, obligation and care ultimately builds them strong enough to raise their voice and stand against the male dominated standards associated with the women (Sen, 2021). Sisterhood apart from the concept of kinship is a sort of community shaped by the social, political and cultural establishments that allows the women to have economic and emotional stability. Sisterhood serves as an important ethical component that fights the male dominance and allow women to have all the rights regardless of their background (Anantharaj & Thirupathi, 2019).

In this article, two ethnographic studies by Louise Brown and Fouzia Saeed have been chosen. Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* (Brown, 2005) penned down the life, struggles, pain, traumas, desires, demands and the societal impact on the prostitutes of the (in)famous Heera

Mandi of Lahore. Fouzia Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of a Red Light Area* (Saeed, 2001/2015) paints a very beautiful picture of the lives of the women who sell their lives to earn and to satisfy the respectable men of the other part of the city.

The bond of sisterhood is associated with the women who are from the respectable part of the society but the bond of sisterhood among the prostitutes is hardly explored because of their business. In this article the bond of sisterhood in Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* and Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of a Red Light Area* is explored among the prostitutes in the Shahi Mohallah/ Heera Mandi based on the data provided by the ethnographic studies.

### Literature Review

In order to establish the link with the bond of sisterhood with prostitution, the scholar reviewed some works carried out previously on Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* and Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of a Red Light Area* but unfortunately did not come across any work on these studies. Thus, the scholar reviewed the works on sisterhood and prostitution in order to set the ground for this article.

Jando & EE carried out an article to critically examine an increase in the prostitution, its effects on Nigeria's youth, to find out the church's opinion and to bring an end to it. Through qualitative method, article concluded that not all the prostitutes enter the business of prostitution by choice and this profession is an issue faced by the entire world. The church should act courteously with the prostitutes as love will convince them to return from this immoral path (Jando & EE, 2021)

Mallah, Rasool, Akhtar and Sanjrani wrote an article with the main to determine the views of local people on the current situation and impact of prostitution in Hyderabad, the district of Sindh. Through qualitative method, in--depth interviews of 10 people were conducted in order to determine the views of the local people about prostitution. It was postulated that prostitution as a business is harmful for the society and government should devise strict laws to eradicate it from the society (Mallah, Rasool, Akhtar, & Sanjrani, 2021).

Asif, Rashid, Ismail, Al-Smadi & Yassin carried out a research on Khalid Hosseini's two novels to identify his ideology and the concept of sisterhood in contrast with envy and noncompliance and prove it as a savior for the Afghan women. Through textual analysis,

the research stated that sisterhood made women strong enough to survive the tyranny and violence inflicted by their husbands. Although envy and non-compliance can shake the trust among women but sisterhood makes them powerful to stand for every women facing oppression anywhere in the society (Asif, Rashid, Ismail, Al-Smadi, & Yassin, 2020).

Cherekar carried out a research on Mariama Bâ's novel in order to determine the bond of sisterhood among the women against the patriarchal society and how it makes them strong. Through characterization and plot analysis, the research concluded that Mariama Bâ wrote to uphold that men are not the centre of attention. She made women believe in the importance of education, freedom of choice and love. With her characters and their bond of sisterhood she postulated that women can participate even in politics and bring a change in the society (Cherekar, 2020).

### **Theoretical Framework**

In order to explore the bond of sisterhood in Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* and Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of Red Light Area*, Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis is applied because the themes of desire, demand, concept of Other and the register theory that comprises of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real, helped to comprehend and grasp the struggles and journey of the characters efficaciously from the chosen two ethnographic studies.

Jacques Lacan (April 13, 1901 to September 9, 1981) was one of the most significant and controversial psychoanalyst as he brought innovative ideas in the field of psychoanalysis. Due to his striking and controversial idea, he is regarded as the modern psychoanalyst. Lacan strongly advocated that the language is the main source that shapes the identity, desires and the unconscious of a person as the subject of the society. Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis is based on three registers/orders namely the imaginary order, the symbolic order and the real order.

### **Lacan's theory of Psychoanalysis: the three registers/orders**

To understand the functioning of human mind Lacan developed a register theory that comprises of three registers namely the imaginary, the symbolic and the real. These three orders/register comprises of all the civilizing principles because Lacan's theory is founded on the language and society. These orders correspond not only to the mental state of a person but also play a significant role in the development of the stages of an infant as it reaches the age of maturity.

### **Mirror stage/The imaginary order**

Mirror stage is one of the most significant concepts introduced by Lacan in his theory of psychoanalysis also called the stage of Ideal ego because when 6 months old, the child cannot develop a sense of self and is dependent on the mother. The child determines itself as a disunity and identifies the image of the mother as its own image and considers itself as complete which is the false image (Kemp, 2006). This false image develops the feelings of alienation and lack that in turn gives birth to ego that is also called the imaginary register.

The imaginary register is based on the images in the mind although not visual or objective but it is real like an image. The imaginary register elaborates the relationship of the object with either his or the image of his body. Ego is the dislocation between the true-self and the perceived image and the child compares itself with the others around him/her

(Lacan, 1977). This ego does not allow the child to accept the fact that the image it sees in the mirror was actually misrecognition of its true self (Gallop, 1982). The imaginary creates an illusion of fullness, completeness, duality and similarity (Evans, 2006).

### **The Symbolic Order**

When the child enters the symbolic order, he enters the world of language, starts making meaning because language itself is the system of symbolic identification and starts making meaning with the help of symbols. It helps the child to develop a sense of self that I have a separate existence. This separation creates a sense of loss in the child that he tries to fill with what Lacan calls as desires but fails owing to the acquisition of language (Tyson, 2014). The symbolic order as postulated by Lacan includes all the realities i.e. language, law and the social structures. With the help of language, the symbolic order generates realities that can be discussed and meaning can be drawn from them (Fink, 1997). Thus, the entry into the symbolic order is defined as the advancement from the world of lack (imaginary order) to the world of desires, fears and established rules that the person has to follow (Ross, 2002). The symbolic and imaginary registers collectively operate to create one of the most important register of Lacan's theory called the real register/order.

### **The Real Order**

The real as the name depicts is not associated with the external reality but the real is something that cannot be symbolized. The real register operates when the baby is dependent on mother for its needs but as soon as the baby enters the imaginary and the symbolic phase, the real comes to rest but remains in the unconscious and can be accessed as brief flashes the entire life (Jamali, 2006). The real as postulated by Lacan is something that is impossible to imagine or think. It is the place where an original entity occurs (Lacan, 1977). The real order is the aspect that. The real is the register that lies beyond the realm of reason, language, words, laws and rules of humans experiences (Himes, 2005).

Thus, the imaginary is defined as the deception, the symbolic in connection to the society and symbols and the real as the impossible-an existence that is present and absent at the same time (Ross, 2002).

### **The concept of Other**

The concept of other is used by Lacan throughout his teachings. He postulated that the Other with capital „O“ specifies the culture, authority and sexuality and the other with a small „o“ specifies ego from the imaginary stage (Lacan, 1977). The imaginary phase is an illusion but when the child enters the symbolic register, he enters with an external image that is referred as the Other. The Other in other words is the knowledge of the absence of something that a person does not have referred as desire or demand (Fink, 2005).

### **Desire**

Desire is the lack-an absence and Lacan postulated that desire is the lack of being as it is associated with the other. Desire is always associated with the desire of the Other, never satiated and hidden behind the desire of the Other (Petry & Hernández, 2010). Along with the desire, Lacan also discussed about need and demand. Need is associated with the biological instincts whereas demand is linked with the recognition and love from the Other in control. At the onset of demand and needs, desire comes into existence.

## Material and Methods

The research is qualitative in nature where the source of the data has been comprised of the comparative study of two works *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* and *The Hidden Culture of a Red Light Area* written by two different authors that are respectively Brown and Saeed. Hence, a particular sample of forty paragraphs (twenty from each) has been selected by applying the purposive sampling technique. As the framework of the study is concerned, the researcher applied Lacan's psychology model to reveal the psychological sufferings of the characters of both texts. Meanwhile, the data has been analyzed under the lens of textual method.

## Results and Discussion

Louise Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* and Fouzia Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of Red Light Area* are explored with the help of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory to examine the bond of sisterhood among the women who are prostitutes. The bond of sisterhood will be explored as the relationship between Brown and Maha from Louise Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* (2005) as Eurocentric and Indo-Pak women, among the prostitutes who are sisters by blood, between the respected and the fallen women and between the prostitutes who are called other collectively.

### **Sisterhood: a relationship between Brown and Maha in Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* (2005)**

Sisterhood is a truce that is not limited to the women who are sisters by blood but infact it is a very vast concept that allows the women to keep their racial and cultural differences aside and come together on the basis of the same goals (Lorde, 1984/2021). The relationship between Brown and Maha is a relationship between Eurocentric and Indo-Pak communities because Brown was a resident of England who came to visit Pakistan's (in)famous Heera Mandi and represents the culture of western country whereas Maha represents the Indo-Pak culture of prostitutes and the culture and norms of their society.

Brown in the western society is an independent respected woman who lives her life independently without any judgment even though she is divorced, yet she lives alone with her family. Whereas Maha as prostitutes represents the other face of Pakistan's society where because of her business she is not considered a part of the respectable society. Despite earning her own her own, she is considered a bad women. Maha represents the morals and ethics attached with the Indo-Pak society that woman who looks after her children, husband and home and even if she works it must be some respectable job otherwise she would not be considered a pious women in any possible way.

"You write books and you have a good job, but you're really stupid. You have a young face. You have a good body. You have white skin and golden hair. You can make a lot of money and you can enjoy yourself" (p.119).

The bond of sisterhood between Brown and Maha points out the differences based on the similarities between them. The desires, hopes, dreams and the cultural boundaries between them are different although both are women. Taking in consideration of Lacan's concept of Other as big 'O' refers to the symbolic notion of the society and individuality and the other as small „o“ refers to the ego from the mirror stage (Lacan, 2011), the relationship between Brown and Maha is cracked where Brown is Other because she has everything that Maha longs for. She is beautiful, pink, independent, divorced still respected, and no one questions her integrity. Thus, Brown signifies absolute freedom,

beauty and the absence of social pressure that Maha as a prostitute undergoes every day. And Maha is the other with a small 'o' and desires what Brown has and longs for it.

"Louise, she said sadly, you are like a beautiful bird. You fly here and you sing and make me happy. And then you fly away again. But when you go to another place where you can carry on singing, I'll still be here" (p. 95).

Thus, the bond of sisterhood between Brown and Maha is the relationship of difference based on the similarities between them. Their bond is the bond dominated by the socio-symbolic order that gives Brown respect as an independent, divorced woman but does not accept Maha even after legally married to a man because of her business of prostitution and is called upon as „taxi“ (p. 115), and „gandi kanjari“ (p. 104). Their bond of sisterhood is the bond of longing and desire of what Brown enjoys and Maha yearns for. Brown as a woman is not worried about her future without a husband whereas Maha struggled to earn her shohar (p.

204) love and respect throughout the study but failed to claim any.

### **Sisterhood: a relationship between prostitutes who are blood sisters**

Sisterhood is a promise, a bond of relief and affection among women who are sisters biologically as it allows them to find relief against the patriarchal society. Sisterhood between biological sisters is a bond that encourages solidarity but sisterly bonds are complex and mark certain differences among women like envy, hatred, competition, racism, jealousy, classicism and hostility (Michie, 1992).

Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* and Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of Red Light Area* are very rich as they portray the culture and the lives of prostitutes of Shahi Mohallah/Heera Mandi along with the relationship of prostitutes who are sisters by blood. Lacan's theory helped to dissect the relationship of sisterhood among the sister prostitutes.

In Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* (2005) the bond of sisterhood is explored between Nisha, Nena and Ariba who are sisters because of same maternal link. The bond of sisterhood between them is dominated by the demands of their mother who was in charge. Here through

Lacanian lens of demand that is expressed as the recognition and love from the Other, the one in control is evident (Lacan, 2011). Their desires, actions and every decision of their life were controlled by the one in authority-their mother. These demands dominated their sisterly relationship because each was more concerned about their customers and their mother than about each other.

"I can't imagine that these girls will make successful prostitutes. Their fate, though, have been sealed from birth" (p. 18).

The bond of sisterhood between Nisha, Nena and Ariba was witnessed to be devoid of the feelings of love, affection, care and warmth. Ariba because of her dark skin color was never accepted by her mother and faced all sorts of tortures but neither of the sisters stood for her nor showed any affection. All they cared about was the desire of their mother.

In Fouzia Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of Red Light Area* (2001) the bond of sisterhood is examined between the two blood sisters namely Shamsa and Kaisera from Shahi Mohallah with same maternal link. The bond of sisterhood between Shamsa and Kaisera is witnessed as the selfish and competitive one. Shamsa the elder one, is selfish,

ignorant and is more concerned about her own self than about Kaisera-the younger sister. She always tried to be a step ahead of Kaisera, made Kaisera feel inferior to her and never cared about how Kaisera felt or what she want. Lacan's socio-symbolic order is witnessed here because it is the rule of the society that the elder one in the family gets more shares and in the business of prostitution, the children especially the daughters are the prized commodity.

"Shamsa had always been more confident than Kaisera. The personality difference was compounded when Shamsa was given the two adopted children by their parents" (p. 224).

Kaisera as a sister always adored Shamsa and wanted to have a relationship of love and affection but she always faced from her harsh behavior and because of the absence of emotional support, Kaisera suffered mentally. Lacan's notion of Other is highlighted that Other is the one who has something that the other desires and thus in turn becomes the desire of the other (Thomas, 2011). Kaisera was the other and Shamsa was the Other with all those qualities that Kaisera desired-to be confident and authoritative like Shamsa.

"Kaisera yearned for a loving relationship with her sister, but that dream never came true" (p. 259).

Thus, the bond of sisterhood between Shamsa and Kaisera was dominated by the selfish and authoritative nature of Shamsa where Kaisera yearned for love and affection of her sister but she failed to find solace in the relationship.

### **Sisterhood: Respected and Fallen Women**

Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* and Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of Red Light Area* are remarkable because they exposed the relationship between women from two banks of the society that can neither meet nor detach from each other. The respected women from the society are named as wives, daughters, sisters or mothers and the fallen women are just prostitutes nothing more, nothing less.

In Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* (2005), the bond of sisterhood between respected and fallen women is shown by the relationship between Mumtaz-the respectable wife of

Adnan- and Maha-the prostitute wife of Adnan. With the help of Lacan's socio-symbolic order, this relationship is comprehended where an individual is a part of the society and belong to the rules, traditions, customs, family, gender and the socio-economic groups (Mafakher, 2017). Mumtaz being the women from the respectable society enjoys respects and happiness both from her husband and the society but Maha on the other hand becomes a symbol of just pleasure because she is still a prostitute and can never claim the respect and happiness that Mumtaz has.

"He only comes to see me for kusi, and if he doesn't have kusi he doesn't give me any money" (p. 143).

Thus, the bond of sisterhood bond that puts focus on the shared strengths and resources to empower women enough to stand without the shadow of patriarchal standpoints (Hooks, 1986) is witnessed to be subjugated by the morals and norms of the society between Mumtaz and Maha that does not allow the two ends meet.

In Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of Red Light Area* (2001) the bond of sisterhood that remove all the boundaries and differences among the women from across the cultures (Jing, 2012) is studied based on the interviews of the respected women conducted by Fouzia. Patriarchal socio-symbolic is highlighted when the relationship is discussed between the respected and fallen women. Fouzia conducted interview of Faiza's mother, Suriya an activist from outside the four walls of Shahi Mohallah along with the interview of Pakeeza begum- a prostitute living in the respected society. The respected women find it very difficult to have friendly relationship with Pakeeza begum because "I think it is better to socially boycott such a woman. I do not even go to her house for kundle during the holy days. I do not want to eat anything from her house" (p. 205). This highlights the mind-set of the patriarchal society that a prostitute even if she has left the Shahi Mohallah, she still can never be a part of the society.

"We have a well-known saying that a woman has four potential roles: mother, wife, sister or prostitute [...] In our culture, being a prostitute has become a completely separate category of existence" (p. 4).

The bridge between the women and the prostitute is the patriarchal standards where a woman is respectable if she submits to the standards of the society and if a woman does not submit to these standards, she is named as bad. As singing, dancing and intimate relationship outside the marriage are unethical according to the society thus, prostitutes are not accepted by the society. Thus, the bond of sisterhood between respected and fallen women is dominated by the patriarchal society and thus the differences based on the cultural norms can never be removed.

### **Sisterhood: Among prostitutes**

Prostitutes are the women who run their business in the (in) famous area of Lahore called Shahi Mohallah/Heera Mandi. Prostitutes earn their livelihood by selling their art like dancing, singing or sexual services. Their dreams, hopes, desires, pains and responsibilities are like. Even the hatred and disgust they receive from the society is same still the prostitutes are separated from each other as the prostitutes of high and low class based on the rules and morals associated with their own culture of prostitution.

In Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* and Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of Red Light Area* this division of prostitutes is portrayed that provides the insight into the exploration of sisterhood among the prostitutes although considered as other by the society, are divided among themselves. In Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* (2005) with the help of Lacan's the real, this division can be best understood. The real is something that is absent and present at the same time (Himes, 2005). The prostitutes are who work and live in the Heera Mandi are called high class prostitutes because of their prices but the prostitutes who live in the dark shabby area of Heera Mandi also called Tibbi Gali are called low class prostitutes because of their life conditions and low rates. In Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of Red Light Area* (2001) same sort of division is highlighted as the prostitutes who are into the business from the very beginning are called kanjar (p. 6) as high profile prostitutes and those who migrate into the business are called 'domini' (p. 128) and 'miti khanian' (p. 226) as low class prostitutes who belong to Tibbi Gali. Also prostitution-centered socio-symbolic order is highlighted because of the rules associated with the business of prostitution according to which those who belong to Kanjar family are the rightful heirs of the business and others are considered a low class.

"I'm from a Kanjar family and not, God forbid, a Mirasi or a Domni, as are many other women here" (p. 160).



The bonds of sisterhood where women despite of their cultural or racial differences stand with each other against all odds but here the bond among these prostitutes who belong to the same business become the real because the society does not accept them despite of their high or low class. They segregate themselves based on their rates but they all belong to the same business and receive the same amount of disgust from the respectable society.

### Conclusion

The article concluded that the bond of sisterhood among the prostitutes in Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* (2005) and Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of Red Light Area* (2001) is explored as shabby and tattered. The prostitutes even though their race, culture, desires, hopes and dreams are similar yet they are disconnected because of the impact of patriarchal society where men are the center of their business. Men are the customers through which prostitutes earn their livelihood as well as their dreams and desires are associated with them. The bond of sisterhood is absent among the prostitutes because of the singularity of their source of earning that is why each prostitute works to be a step ahead of the other prostitute thus giving no concern about other prostitutes. The red-light areas called the Shahi Mohallah/Heera Mandi serve to sustain the patriarchal Pakistani society as the Lacanian real because these red light areas are the most the most sexually centralized and socially most segregated area of the society. Although the business of prostitution is considered a social evil yet even after that this business flourishes in the society and men are the ones who visit these places for pleasure. The desires/lacks of the prostitutes are all associated with the demands inflicted on them to earn a living for their families for themselves. Their desires like to be accepted by the society, to exist the business of prostitution and to have intimate relationship with their customers are actually the lacks because they cannot have all these.

The society acts as the Other with a big 'O' and prostitutes as small 'o' and the prostitutes desire to have all that the society has but returns as a lack because they are not accepted by the society. Men get benefits from prostitution but condemn this business as a social evil. Thus, the psychoanalytic exploration of sisterhood in Brown's *The Dancing Girls of Lahore* and Saeed's *Taboo! The Hidden Culture of Red Light Area* is shabby owing to the patriarchal society.

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